"Winslow Homer and the New England Coast" is the third in a series of exhibitions devoted to "American Masters" to be presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County. This exhibition was organized by Ziba de Weck, guest curator.

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The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog, 1894
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches
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WINSLOW HOMER AND THE NEW ENGLAND COAST

November 9, 1984–January 9, 1985

Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County

Winslow Homer and his dog Jack in Marshfield, Massachusetts, 1869. Photograph, 3½ x 3¼ inches. Homer Collection, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.

Acknowledgments

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Z.W.

WINSLOW HOMER AND THE NEW ENGLAND COAST

For more than forty years Winslow Homer (1836–1910) depicted the ocean, its harbors, beaches, port towns and their residents with a variety and skill unsurpassed by any other American artist of the time. Homer's long-lasting fascination with the sea began in his birthplace of Boston, then a busy, vital seaport. His family, moreover, had been involved in the shipping trade for generations.

Homer was always deeply attached to New England, and lived in Boston until the age of twenty-three. In late 1854, he commenced his only artistic training—as an apprentice to a Boston lithographer. Within two years he was producing illustrations for the wood-engravings in *Ballou's Pictorial* and *Harper's Weekly*; by 1859, he had moved to New York, where he continued to work for *Harper's Weekly*. In 1861, Homer took up oil painting and, about a decade later, painting in watercolor. Though he also produced numerous drawings and a series of etchings, his oils and watercolors remain his most brilliant achievements.

"The sun will not rise, or set, without my notice and thanks," Homer wrote late in life. This sentiment expresses more than his New Englander's love for the outdoors; it explains as well why most of his images represent open-air subjects, from the life of soldiers at the front during the Civil War, to outdoor sports, country life, fishing and hunting scenes and, finally, seascapes. Homer's works, however, are "realistic" only in the sense that they depict recognizable people, objects, and settings. Like all accomplished artists, he also "revised" nature to suit his own expressive needs and the prevailing trends in contemporaneous art. His early beach scenes, for example, show the influence both of the movement called Luminism and of Amer-

Fig. 1. **On the Beach,** 1870
Oil on canvas, 15 x 24½ inches. Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York.

ican genre painting. In *On the Beach* of 1870 (Fig. 1), Homer's inclusion of ordinary people engaged in everyday or leisurely activities follows the genre tradition established in the 1830s by such American artists as William Sidney Mount (Fig. 2). But in format and structure, *On the Beach* reflects the Luminist sensibility (Fig. 3)—the preference for parallel planes taking measured steps into depth, for low, taut horizons, and horizontal, open-ended compositions.

Homer spent the summer of 1873 in the harbor town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. This Gloucester sojourn was significant, for it was then that Homer first worked in watercolor. The medium enabled him to paint out-of-doors and to finish a picture quickly. Most of the watercolors produced that summer represent children at play or occupied with chores, as in *The Clam Bake* (Fig. 4), or *Sea-side Sketches—A Clam-Bake* (Fig. 5), the composite wood-engraving partly based on it. In all of these works, Homer has departed from his Luminist forebears, for the sea takes a background role. Not only is the horizon line raised, but the special attention to the figures in the foreground belies the Luminists' emphasis on nature as the primary subject of art. From this time on, Homer's seascapes would be his own creations.

Homer soon came to appreciate and master the fluidity inherent in the watercolor medium, as well as its potential for rendering atmospheric effects. In *Sailing the Catboat* (Fig. 6), also completed in 1873, the figures are strongly out-

Fig. 2. William Sidney Mount. **The Novice,** 1847. Oil on canvas, 30 x 25 inches. The Museums at Stony Brook, New York; Museums Collection.

Fig. 3. Fitz Hugh Lane. **Owl's Head, Penobscot Bay, Maine,** 1862. Oil on canvas, 16 x 26 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; M. and M. Karolik Collection.

lined, but the sea and sky are brushed on freely and expressively. The white paper, left bare in some places, covered with thin washes in others, becomes a means of representing the varying intensities of light on the water surface.

After spending several summers in the Adirondack Mountains, Homer returned to Gloucester in 1880, settling on Ten Pound Island in the middle of Gloucester harbor. He worked outside, and entirely in watercolor. In *Eastern Point Light* (Fig. 7), the simple horizontals and the calm sea of his earlier Gloucester works reappear, but there is a new exploration of light and atmospheric conditions. Homer was never closer to Impressionism than in these water-

Fig. 4. **The Clam Bake,** 1873. Watercolor on paper pasted on cardboard, 8⅜ x 13⅞ inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Mrs. Homer H. Johnson.

Fig. 5. **Sea-side Sketches—A Clam-Bake,** 1873. *Harper's Weekly,* August 23, 1873, p. 740. Wood-engraving, 9¼ x 14 inches. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

colors. Because the colors are transparent and the shadows no longer opaque, every object and area emanates a reflective light that unifies the composition and seems to be the work's real subject.

In the spring of 1881, Homer left for a solitary stay on the North Sea coast of England. For eighteen months he lived in the fishing village of Cullercoats, near the mouth of the Tyne River. The area—well known for its rugged cliffs, rough climate, storms, and shipwrecks—had a striking impact on Homer's work. Indeed, the sojourn is considered a turning point in Homer's career. The gray and damp English climate changed his palette, subduing the previously bright tones of his watercolors so that their overall effect is almost gray. And the stormy sea at Tynemouth was markedly different from the quiet waters of Gloucester harbor. Homer's seascapes, such as *The Wreck* of 1882 (Fig. 8), became more dramatic and his subjects more serious. His figures are now adults and they work not at chores, like Homer's earlier children, but at laborious, unending tasks. Moreover, as in *The Wreck*, they often serve as witnesses to the elemental perils of the sea.

In 1883, a few months after his return from England, Homer settled at Prout's Neck, Maine. During the 1880s, this small peninsula, located twelve miles south of Portland, was inhabited by a few farmers and fishermen. The most striking physical aspect of Prout's Neck is its impressive promontory, formed by dark and striated rocks.

Fig. 6. **Sailing the Catboat,** 1873. Watercolor on paper, 7½ x 13½ inches. Private collection.

Fig. 7. **Eastern Point Light,** 1880. Watercolor over pencil on paper, 9½ x 13½ inches. The Art Museum, Princeton University, New Jersey; Gift of Alastair B. Martin, Class of 1938.

Because of Prout's Neck's orientation, it is subjected to easterly winds and storms, and the surf against its cliffs is spectacular. It was an ideal place for Homer to continue exploring the visual and dramatic effects of perilous waters. Except for a few quiet sunset scenes that he painted from nearby Saco Bay, his Prout's Neck seascapes are invariably stark and powerful.

During the first summer at Prout's Neck, Homer devoted much time to watercolor studies of rocks and sea. He soon achieved extraordinary mastery in the rendering of figures, the movement of the waves, and weather conditions. The Prout's Neck seascapes remain subdued in color, but the size of the canvases increased, and he executed forms with a free and vigorous brush. As for his subject, *The Ship's Boat* (Fig. 9) exemplifies what was by now a recurring theme in

Fig. 8. **The Wreck (Girl with Red Stockings),** 1882. Watercolor on paper, 13¼ x 19⁹⁄₁₆ inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Bequest of John T. Spaulding.

Fig. 9. **The Ship's Boat,** 1883. Watercolor on paper, 16 x 29 inches. The New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Charles F. Smith Fund.

Homer's work: shipwreck and attempted rescue. Even in *Eight Bells* of 1886 (Fig. 12), where the fishermen are safely aboard ship, the sea and sky are so turbulent that danger seems imminent.

By the 1890s, when Homer was in his sixties, the confrontation between elemental forces—between water and land—was the artist's predominant theme. In most works of this decade, figures and narrative components have been eliminated. If one compares the painting *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog* with a photograph of the actual site (Figs. 10, 11), it is clear that Homer has simplified and flattened the foreground ledges and background houses, describing each form in broad, translucent strokes. Such reductiveness has made this painting famous as a masterpiece of Homer's "modernist" phase. But the effect of these pictorial decisions also intensifies the focus on the natural environment. Without the distraction of small details—of windows, porticos, or shrubs—we are left to confront sharp rocky outcroppings against a sea-engendered fog.

In the last decade of his life—and the first of the twentieth century—Homer produced some of his most remarkable seascapes. His imagery was never so bold and so strong as in these final paintings, or his brush more forceful. In *Kissing the Moon* of 1904 (Fig. 13), the monumental swells are rendered with an austerity that leaves no doubt as to the might of the sea. Only the trace of the boat's gunwhale at the left tells us that these three fishermen are not dangerously

Fig. 10. **The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog,** 1894. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; R. T. Miller Fund.

Fig. 11. **The Ark and Homer's Studio,** 1938. Homer Collection, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. Photograph by Philip C. Beam.

afloat in the vast ocean. But at the same time, their passive, expressionless faces suggest a mute acceptance of the power of nature. Such thematically rich, masterfully executed works as *Kissing the Moon* reveal Homer's seascapes as among the finest ever made in the history of American art.

Ziba de Weck
Guest Curator

Fig. 12. **Eight Bells,** 1886. Oil on canvas, 25 5/16 x 30 1/8 inches. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Gift of Anonymous Donor.

Fig. 13. **Kissing the Moon,** 1904. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Candace C. Stimson Bequest.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

Oils

On the Beach, 1870
Oil on canvas, 15 x 24½
Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York

Shipbuilding at Gloucester, 1871
Oil on canvas, 13½ x 19¾
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; Purchase

Promenade on the Beach, 1880
Oil on canvas, 20 x 30⅛
Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts; Gift of the Misses Emily and Elizabeth Mills, in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Mills

Eight Bells, 1886
Oil on canvas, 25 5/16 x 30⅛
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Gift of Anonymous Donor

To the Rescue, 1886
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30
The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog, 1894
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; R. T. Miller Fund

The Fisher Girl, 1894
Oil on canvas, 27¾ x 27¾
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Massachusetts; George D. Pratt, '93, to Amherst, by gift

Sunset, Saco Bay, 1896
Oil on academy board, 13½ x 20
IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York

Kissing the Moon, 1904
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts; Candace C. Stimson Bequest

Watercolors

Boy on the Rocks, 1873
Watercolor on paper, 8 x 13
Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York

The Clam Bake, 1873
Watercolor on paper pasted on cardboard, 8⅜ x 13⅞
The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Mrs. Homer H. Johnson

Sailing the Catboat, 1873
Watercolor on paper, 7½ x 13½
Private collection

The See-Saw, 1873
Watercolor on paper, 7 x 13
Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York

Three Boys on the Shore, 1873
Gouache and watercolor on paper, mounted on cardboard, 8½ x 14
Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois; Daniel J. Terra Collection

Waiting for Dad, c. 1873
Watercolor on paper, 9¾ x 13⅝
Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland, California; Mills College Collection; Gift of Jane C. Tolman

Three Boys in a Dory with Lobster Pots, 1875
Watercolor on paper, 13⅞ x 20
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Nelson Fund

Boys Bathing, 1880
Watercolor on paper, 9¼ x 13¼
Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; Gift of Mrs. William C. Brownell

Boys Beaching a Dory, 1880
Watercolor, pencil, and gouache on paper, 9½ x 13 7/16
The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio; Gift of Florence Scott Libbey

Eastern Point Light, 1880
Watercolor over pencil on paper, 9½ x 13½
The Art Museum, Princeton University, New Jersey; Gift of Alastair B. Martin, Class of 1938

Sunset Fires, 1880
Watercolor on paper, 9¼ x 13⅝
Westmoreland Museum of Art, Greenburg, Pennsylvania; The William A. Coulter Fund

Young Woman, 1880
Watercolor on paper, 9⅛ x 13⅜
The Strong Museum, Rochester, New York

The Breakwater, 1883
Watercolor on paper, 13⅜ x 20¾
Private collection

The Northeaster, 1883
Watercolor on paper, 14⅛ x 19¾
The Brooklyn Museum, New York; Bequest of Sidney B. Curtis in memory of S. W. Curtis

The Ship's Boat, 1883
Watercolor on paper, 16 x 29
The New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut; Charles F. Smith Fund

A Swell of the Ocean, 1883
Watercolor on paper, 14 x 20⅜
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd

Diamond Shoal, 1905
Watercolor on paper, 13⅞ x 21¾
IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York

Drawings

Furling the Jib, c. 1875
Charcoal and Chinese white on paper, 8⅛ x 12¼
Private collection

Fishermen on Shore, 1884
Charcoal and white chalk on paper, 12¼ x 22¾
Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey

Mackerel Fishing, 1884
Charcoal and white chalk on paper, 14½ x 23½
Private collection

The Smuggler of Prout's Neck, 1884
Charcoal and chalk on paper, 15 x 23
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York

Study for **The Signal of Distress,** c. 1890
Pencil and watercolor on paper, 13⅞ x 11⅝
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, New York

Study for **The Lookout—All's Well,** 1895–96
Black crayon, with corrections in white gouache on cardboard, 12 7/16 x 13 13/16
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, New York

Wood-engravings

Sea-side Sketches—A Clam-Bake, 1873
Harper's Weekly, August 23, 1873, p. 740
Wood-engraving, 9¼ x 14
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Gloucester Harbor, 1873
Harper's Weekly, September 27, 1873, p. 844
Wood-engraving, 9⅛ x 14
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Shipbuilding, Gloucester Harbor, 1873
Harper's Weekly, October 11, 1873, p. 900
Wood-engraving, 9⅛ x 13¼
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Dad's Coming!, 1873
Harper's Weekly, November 1, 1873, p. 969
Wood-engraving, 9¼ x 13½
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Gathering Berries, 1874
Harper's Weekly, July 11, 1874, p. 584
Wood-engraving, 9⅛ x 13½
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

See-Saw—Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1874
Harper's Weekly, September 12, 1874, p. 757
Wood-engraving, 9⅛ x 13¼
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire

Etchings

The Life Line, 1884
Etching, 12⅞ x 17¼
The New York Public Library, Print Collection; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Eight Bells (1887), restrike 1941
Etching, 19½ x 24⅞
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Harris Brisbane Dick Fund

Book

Lowell, James Russell. *The Courtin.*
Illustrated by Winslow Homer. Boston:
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